

critics. He does, however, give short shrift to the lunatic fringe who have always found the script a fertile playground for their imaginations, seeing links between Easter Island and the Indus Valley script (of 4000 years earlier, and at the other side of the globe!), as well as even more tenuous ties to Egypt, Cornwall, Dalmatia or Zimbabwe. Most "decipherments" of *rongorongo* proposed in the past were no more than simple guesswork, as his account makes devastatingly clear.

Where Fischer's own work is concerned, he feels confident that most of the surviving examples of the script are cosmogonies (i.e. chants explaining the wide variety of fanciful copulations that led to the creation of everything in the natural world). It is certainly noteworthy that, in 1994, the first presentation of his claim, at an international conference on Austronesian linguistics in Holland, received overwhelming backing from his peers, and that Thomas Barthel, the universally respected doyen of *rongorongo* studies, who died last year, sent him a letter declaring "unlimited endorsement."

Fischer's "*Glyphbreaker*" is a far shorter and more readable account of his own life and career; the *rongorongo* story constitutes the final section, but the bulk of the book covers his earlier decipherment of Europe's oldest known script, the enigmatic markings on Crete's Phaistos Disc of 1600 BC. When my essay on Fischer and *rongorongo* appeared in *New Scientist*, the section devoted to the Phaistos Disc was edited out for lack of space, with only a brief mention remaining. Ironically, almost all of the letters which arrived in response were inquiries about this earlier work on the Disc, which has posed a tantalizing challenge to many minds for decades. So, for all those who have been unable to obtain a copy of Fischer's small 1988 book on the decipherment, *Glyphbreaker* provides a step-by-step account of how he cracked this code, proceeding with the utmost care and objectivity, constantly modifying and improving his method, and gradually filling in the blanks. He eventually arrived at the unsuspected conclusion that the Disc was inscribed with an ancient Minoan language that was closely related to Mycenaean Greek. It constituted a call to arms, to repel the Carians, piratical invaders from Anatolia. Fischer achieved a thoroughly believable translation which was rewarded with a congratulatory reception from the National Geographic Society in Washington—but once again, his claim met with a very mixed response from fellow epigraphers. Indeed he describes the reaction by some as "a rude slap in the face." Yet his decipherment later found telling support in the discovery that Thucydides, the 5th century BC Greek historian, claimed that Minos of Crete had driven the Carians out of the Cyclades, an event that was of such importance in Helladic history that it was obviously passed down for a thousand years or more.

The most impressive aspect of *Glyphbreaker* is not so much that this remarkable man has been able to crack two entirely different scripts, a feat unique in the history of epigraphy, but rather that he has done so despite tremendous privations in his life. With the good fortune to have a supportive and devoted wife, Fischer has endured years of financial difficulty, of times when a telephone was not affordable and even stamps for letters to colleagues had to be carefully rationed. His efforts and dogged persistence have paid off, twice, if not in financial terms then certainly in the satisfaction of achieving a solution to two tremendous puzzles which had defeated many great minds.

Regardless of the eventual validity of Fischer's solutions—and certainly to a layman such as myself who does not know a grapheme from a glyph, his method, as painstakingly explained here, appears logical, objective and impeccable—one cannot but admire the selfless and single-minded dedication with which he has pursued his goal.

[An edited version of this review appeared in *New Scientist* for 14 February 1998]



Bali Handbook, Second Edition (1997)


by Bill Dalton

Black/white photos and line drawings,
750 pages, 135 maps; \$19.95
Moon Travel Handbooks, Chico, CA
email: sbooth@moon.com

Review by Georgia Lee

The author of this travel book, Bill Dalton, is the founder of Moon Publications and the author of Moon's earlier *Indonesia Handbook* and the First Edition of the *Bali Handbook*. Thirty years of Indonesian experience is behind the book and its depth of coverage is stunning. Dalton's observations and writings have an anthropological emphasis and the details in the book obviously come from a long familiarity with the subject. The first half of the book describes the land, flora and fauna, the convoluted history, tourism, language, religion, music and the arts. A section is devoted to festivals and events, which seem to consume a great deal of time and energy in Bali. Dalton covers the usual "getting around" information and includes how to deal with officials, what to take, and how to stay healthy. One section discusses the ecological problems plaguing this island—from an surreal population of scabrous dogs to erosion from forest removal.

The second part of the book is divided up by regencies. Each descriptive section includes sights, accommodations, food, shopping, sports, trekking, golfing, mountain climbing, snorkeling, etc., for all of the nine divisions. There is a comprehensive glossary of Balinese terms and 21 pages of Bahasa Indonesia—phrases. The reading list is extensive and annotated. Whether or not one is planning a trip to the magical island of Bali, *Bali Handbook* can be read for pleasure and information. It is indispensable for the traveler.

That Bali is such a bargain at this time is reflected in the March 30th issue of *Business Week* which describes some of the current prices. The rupiah has been devaluated by 80% as a result of the Asian financial crisis, thus providing great discounts—not only in hotels and food, but also in Balinese art, ranging from batik baby clothes to stone statues, to gold and silver jewelry. 



*From rei-miro to Makemake, from tahonga to birdman.
All Rapanui motifs from island petroglyphs and artifacts.
Check out our Dingbats on page 59!*